



Engaging lived and living expertise in COVID-19 recovery planning

Submission to the Toronto Office of Recovery and Rebuild Consultation

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Executive summary

At the best of times, there is not enough engagement of lived expertise¹ in policy processes – though the City of Toronto has made significant progress in recent years. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis in March 2020, there has been an unprecedented government response to the pandemic, with the rapid launch of massive new programs by the federal, provincial, and city governments. For the most part, people directly affected by poverty and homelessness have not been included in planning and decisions about these new programs.

This submission draws on one-on-one conversations with advocates with lived expertise and organizations, and a round-table discussion with advocates with lived expertise, to examine how the City should engage lived/living expertise in recovery and rebuild planning.

These dialogues examined the engagement of persons directly affected in the City’s crisis response; the impacts of COVID-19 for people facing homeless, poverty, and disability; and people’s experiences with new programs in response to the pandemic. The discussions yielded recommendations on priority actions for recovery and rebuild; meaningful engagement of advocates with lived expertise in recovery planning; and building lived expert leadership.

Key insights emerging from the dialogues are summarized below.

Engagement of advocates with lived expertise in responses to COVID-19.

- Even before COVID-19, people with lived and living experience of homelessness, inadequate housing, poverty, and disability faced barriers when engaging in policy processes.
- There have been very few forums for advocates with lived expertise to get information and provide input into policies and programs in response to COVID-19.

1 This report uses the terms “advocate with lived expertise,” “lived / living expertise,” “lived / living expert,” “lived / living experience,” “first voice advocate,” “advocate,” and “expert,” to acknowledge the knowledge and expertise of persons who have first-hand experience with inadequate housing, homelessness, poverty, and disability, whether currently or in the past.

It is important to recognize that people’s identities and experiences are complex. Many people working in professional roles in front-line work, advocacy, and public service may bring lived expertise as one of their assets in their professional work. The advocates consulted for this report have advanced skills, experience, and education – both formal and informal – that are equivalent to, or even exceed, those of other professionals. Many have worked in professional roles. Yet all share ongoing experiences with degrees of income insecurity and housing insecurity, in part as a result of systemic failures to recognize and compensate lived expertise.

- Where advocates with lived expertise have had input, it's often because they have initiated the discussion.
- Consultation processes and advisory bodies may be tokenistic, and fail to engage the diversity of people with lived and living experience.
- Front-line organizations have found it difficult to sustain participatory leadership of members during the quarantine period.
- Virtual engagement may pose barriers.
- Many people in the inner suburbs aren't interested in engaging because they aren't seeing results from their engagement.
- Engagement has continued, and even increased, where advocates with lived expertise are already in leadership roles.
- Policy engagement may not be a priority for many people experiencing homelessness as they cope with impacts of COVID-19.
- There are some good examples of COVID-19 initiatives using a participatory approach.

Impacts of COVID-19 for persons experiencing poverty, inadequate housing, homelessness, and disabilities.

- The COVID-19 crisis resembles everyday life for many people living in poverty and people with disabilities.
- Closure of organizations and City services has led to loss of vital income and resources.
- Impacts of quarantine and distancing are exacerbated for people with disabilities.
- There is a critical lack of access to basic necessities of life for people in encampments and inadequate housing.
- People facing homelessness, disability, and poverty encounter racism and human rights violations in interactions with police and City bylaw officers.

Experiences with new programs in response to COVID-19.

- CERB doesn't help people on social assistance.
- The \$100 ODSP / OW top-up is inadequate, and people lack information about it.
- Tenants continue to face rent increases and eviction threats in spite of the province's eviction moratorium.

- Measures to support students are inadequate.
- People are afraid to go into congregate shelters because of COVID-19 risk, and are frustrated by the unevenness and lack of clear information about the City’s hotel program for people experiencing homelessness.
- Inner suburb homelessness experiences are different from downtown experiences, and require different strategies and solutions.
- There are not enough services for people facing homelessness, poverty, and mental health challenges outside the downtown core.

Priority actions for the City of Toronto’s recovery and rebuild.

- Take leadership on cross-jurisdictional issues.
- Make major, rapid change the new normal.
- Proactively provide clear and complete information about benefits and programs.
- Urgently increase resources and services for people facing homelessness.
- Implement protections for tenants.
- Invest in permanent housing solutions.
- Respond to gender-based violence.
- Increase income benefits to match the CERB.
- Make mental health services available in every neighbourhood.

Meaningful engagement of advocates with lived expertise in recovery planning.

- Engage the City’s already-existing lived expert advisors.
- Include advocates with lived and living expertise at all crisis response and recovery planning tables.
- Engage advocates with lived expertise from the outset, and make space for their leadership throughout the process.
- Compensate people equitably for their expertise.
- Address imbalances of power and influence.
- Provide training for those with *and* without lived expertise.
- Ensure access to technology for participation.
- Make engagement accessible by addressing barriers and covering the cost of technology.

- Build institutional memory and cultural change for progress within the City.
- Broaden networks to get more people involved.
- Act on input from advocates with lived expertise.

Building leadership of advocates with lived expertise.

- Seize the momentum to push for major changes on housing, homelessness, poverty, racism, police violence, and exclusion of people with disabilities.
- Don't wait to be consulted – lead the way.
- Proactively provide guidelines to governments and organizations who seek to engage advocates with lived expertise.
- Learn to navigate policy spaces, and know who your allies are.
- Organize together for change.

A. Background

At the best of times, there is not enough engagement of lived expertise in policy processes. People with living or lived experience of homelessness, inadequate housing, poverty, and disability are often left out of decisions about policies and programs that affect their lives. The resulting policies and programs tend to have gaps, because they were formulated without the benefit of input from people who are facing homelessness and poverty, and especially those who are Indigenous, Black, people of colour, people with disabilities, women, immigrants and refugees, young people, older adults, and people of diverse genders, sexual orientations, and faiths.

Rights-based participation requires that people who are directly impacted are engaged meaningfully in all decision-making processes. All processes, including policy and engagement, should include lived experts in their design, implementation, and monitoring. People with lived and living experience should be recognized as experts and not simply storytellers. They should be included as equal decision-makers in the bodies that lead consultation and policy-making processes. Rights-based participation requires an equitable process that addresses material barriers to participation and includes new approaches to participation and accountability. Finally, it is important to acknowledge that no individual can speak for everyone with lived/living experience.

The City of Toronto has made improvements in rights-based participation and leadership of people directly affected in policy processes. The City established a Lived Experience Advisory Group (LEAG) for its Poverty Reduction Strategy. In its HousingTO Plan, the City committed to taking a human rights approach to housing and homelessness, including a commitment to rights-based participation and accountability. Since 2017, the annual budget process has included an Intersectional Gender Equity Review of divisional budget proposals, by an external committee that includes advocates with lived expertise. While there is still progress to be made, these represent important steps forward.

But then the COVID-19 crisis hit. Since March 2020, there has been an unprecedented government response to the pandemic, with the rapid launch of massive programs by the federal, provincial, and city governments, such as the federal Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB), the province of Ontario's top-up for OW and ODSP, and changes to the City's shelter system. For the most part, people directly affected by poverty and homelessness have not been included in planning and decisions about these new programs.

In their professional roles, Emily Paradis and Effie Vlachoyannacos have been meeting with policy-makers from the municipal, provincial, and federal governments to provide input to new policies and programs in response to COVID-19. We also learned about forums the City had put in place to coordinate emergency responses, such as the City's Emergency Operations Committee, the Interdivisional Table on Encampments, the community coordinating tables convened by the United Way Greater Toronto, and regular update calls with City officials for organizations in the homelessness sector.

We noticed there was a lack of meaningful involvement of colleagues with lived and living expertise in these discussions. We realized we needed to walk the talk. First, we needed to check in with colleagues with lived and living expertise to ensure that input to policy-makers is grounded in the priorities of people directly affected. Even more importantly, we need to insist that advocates with lived expertise be represented at these planning and decision-making tables.

B. The process leading to this report

With the support of Maytree, we decided to develop a submission to the Toronto Office of Recovery and Rebuild (TORR) consultation, with a focus on how the City should engage lived/living expertise in recovery planning.

In June, we had one-on-one conversations with seven advocates with lived expertise of homelessness, poverty, and disability. These individuals are also current or recent members of advisory bodies and advocacy groups.² We also spoke to workers from ten front-line agencies, with a particular focus on organizations serving Etobicoke, North York, and Scarborough, to learn more about the impacts of COVID-19 for organizations and the people they serve.

In these conversations, we explored three key questions:

- Are you aware of any participatory engagement already happening on current responses to COVID-19? Have you had input or been consulted?
- How have COVID-19 and new programs (like the CERB, the OW-ODSP top-up, City homelessness programs) been affecting you and people in your networks?
- Would you want to be part of a broader conversation?

Following those conversations, nine advocates with lived expertise participated in a virtual round-table on July 17, 2020. Questions included:

- What do you, and others in your networks, see as priorities for the immediate crisis response, the re-start, and the longer-term recovery from COVID-19?
- What are your recommendations for how the City, and other levels of government, can meaningfully engage people facing homelessness and poverty as it creates and implements programs?
- What support and resources do people require in order to work together to advance their issues and priorities?

² Affiliations include current and past members of City advisories such as the Lived Expert Advisory Group (LEAG) to the Poverty Reduction Strategy, Tenant Protection Subcommittee Advisory, Tenants First Advisory, and HousingTO External Advisory Committee. Other affiliations among the advocates participating in this submission include the Dream Team, ACORN, the Lived Experience Caucus of Toronto Alliance to End Homelessness, Ontario Children's Advancement Coalition, Black Voices United, Mutual Aid Parkdale, Encampment Support Network, TTCriders, and peer programs at Dixon Hall, Sistering, and St. Stephen's.

C. Themes from conversations with advocates with lived expertise and organizations

1. Engagement of advocates with lived expertise in responses to COVID-19

Even before COVID-19, people with lived experience faced barriers when engaging in policy processes. People living with homelessness, poverty, and disability encounter disrespect when addressing council and committees. City-led consultation processes are usually ineffective, and tend to engage white, professional homeowners. Lived/living expert groups that are led by service agencies are at risk of being co-opted and turned into a program that adds to the agency's funding.

“[Councillors and staff] are so rude – they ask us to come and talk, then when we’re talking they talk to each other! It really unnerved me when I came to speak in November. The only ones who listened to us were the ones who worked with LEAG.”

There have been very few forums for advocates with lived expertise to get information and provide input into policies and programs in response to COVID-19. None of the advocates we spoke to had been invited to join the City's emergency planning discussions. City advisory bodies such as the LEAG have not been convened during the crisis period.

“I think we could have still met, and we should have been asked about what’s happening [with COVID-19].”

Where advocates with lived expertise have had input, it's often because they have initiated the discussion. For example, the advocate-led Ontario Children's Advancement Coalition hosted an online meeting with more than 1,000 youth who had been in care. Government officials were invited to listen. The Member Advocacy Committee (MAC) at The Neighbourhood Group has met regularly to discuss priorities for action during the pandemic, and has taken actions such as sending letters to the Premier and City Council.

“We have to convene ourselves – we are not going to get invited!”

Consultation processes and advisory bodies may be tokenistic, and fail to engage the diversity of advocates with lived expertise. Processes fail to engage experts who are Black, Indigenous, people of colour, young people, and those with disabilities. Some forums (such as a disability committee convened by the province) have

included only one or two advocates with lived expertise. This creates an imbalance of power and influence.

“Our voices get overpowered by others at the table.”

“The media are still going to adult ‘experts’ [about issues facing young people in care]. And the lived experts they go to tend to be white.”

Front-line organizations have found it difficult to sustain participatory leadership of members during the quarantine period. Many agencies have put peer programs on hold to focus on crisis front-line responses, and increased need for food and other basic services. Staff who usually support engagement may be working from home, caring for children, or redeployed to other areas. With fewer in-person services, there are fewer natural opportunities for engagement. Some members are turned off by formal engagement approaches using surveys and questionnaires.

Virtual engagement may pose barriers. This problem has worsened with the restrictions of COVID-19. While many experts may have access to technology and are highly skilled in using it, some may lack the resources to use it, such as a data plan or phone minutes. People living outside may have no place to charge devices. Organizations lack experience in virtual engagement and there has been a steep learning curve in the midst of the crisis.

“This pandemic has people not thinking straight! When you plan a meeting, you think, ‘I’m going to make sure A, B, and C’ but they forget about D, E, F.”

Many people in the inner suburbs aren’t interested in engaging because they aren’t seeing results from their engagement. Members of agencies in the inner suburbs hear announcements of increased funding for supports, but aren’t able to access them because their neighbourhoods haven’t been deemed a priority for these funds.

Engagement has continued, and even increased, where advocates with lived expertise are already in leadership roles. Some peer advocacy groups are still meeting, and carrying out research and advocacy such as meetings with City councillors. But these groups are often made up of people who are currently housed, not those currently experiencing homelessness.

“We invited City councillors and the Mayor to attend a Zoom meeting in May 2020.”

Policy engagement may not be a priority for many people experiencing homelessness as they cope with impacts of COVID-19. While people want to influence and improve the services they rely on, many are in survival mode.

Negative encounters, such as evictions from camping spots or long waits for a shelter bed, diminish trust.

There are some good examples of COVID-19 initiatives using a participatory approach. Some advocates with lived expertise had heard about and applied to research studies led by St. Michael's Hospital that were hiring peer researchers.

2. Impacts of COVID-19 for persons experiencing poverty, inadequate housing, homelessness, and disabilities

The COVID-19 crisis resembles everyday life for many people living in poverty and people with disabilities. Several commented that what middle-class people were finding difficult about COVID-19 – such as isolation, being stuck at home, facing anxiety when venturing out to get food – are all too familiar for people living in poverty and people with disabilities. The pandemic compounds the long-standing stigma and marginalization faced by social housing tenants and other groups.

“I want to say to people, take the last four months and turn it into 25 years. Food costing too much, isolating because you don't have two bucks to go to Tim's. ... The community that I live in, nothing's changed. This is how poor people live all the time.”

“Lots of people have been living in isolation for a long time! All these free programming and supports are coming online now when able-bodied people are getting impacted – people with disabilities have had to find their way on their own. But it's expected, like 'your life is difficult and it's going to be like that anyways.'”

Closure of organizations and City services has led to loss of vital income and resources. Peer programs that provided honoraria have been put on hold. Organizations and advocates report a huge increase in food insecurity and demand for food programs. Drop-ins are closed or limited to members living outside, and most meal programs are now offered on a take-out basis, resulting in social isolation. The closure of libraries, community centres, and agencies has restricted people's access to washrooms, computers, and free Wi-Fi. There are too few places to cool down during heat waves, and cooling centres are too far away, especially in the inner suburbs. These losses have a severe impact on health and well-being.

“My honorariums were helping me live. Without them, I've had to go to food banks. I'm diabetic, now my sugar is through the roof. For me to eat well, it costs money. I'm exhausted, I almost feel debilitated.”

Impacts of quarantine and distancing are exacerbated for people with disabilities. Physical distancing requirements impede access to public spaces and basic needs.

“COVID has caused a fear of helping and interacting. Now people can’t get assistance. For example, in stores – identifying products on shelves, getting things down from shelves, knowing where to tap your card. People being refused because they only have cash.”

There is a critical lack of access to basic necessities of life for people in encampments and inadequate housing. For people living in encampments, closure of parks and community centres results in lack of access to drinking water, washrooms, and sanitation. Many cooling centres are not equipped with shower facilities and changes of clothing for people living outside. People living in encampments are experiencing profiling from police and bylaw officers.

“It’s hard because fountains and bathrooms are shut down. ... I can see why the City did it, but people still have to use the bathroom. Where I’m staying [in Scarborough], there’s nowhere to use the bathroom. Facilities are non-existent unless you’re downtown. Almost every porta john I’ve come across in the City has been padlocked. Other City facilities are closed too. Then you hear about people getting ticketed for pissing in alleyways.”

People facing homelessness, disability, and poverty encounter racism and human rights violations in interactions with police and City bylaw officers. Encampment residents have their homes and belongings destroyed by police and bylaw officers. People with disabilities who are Black, Indigenous, and of colour experience heightened risk of police violence.

“I have a friend who was living under the Bathurst bridge – they came and cut the walls of his \$200 tent so he and his dog couldn’t sleep in it anymore. We need to get everybody to understand a tent is a house, you can’t destroy that. It’s like kicking in the windows of someone’s house. ... Everyone’s quoting this housing as a human right to the bylaw officers, but they’re saying no it’s not a right.”

“Black disabled interactions with police – that is being left out of the discussion. We are still an afterthought. Police can mistake disability as lack of cooperation or aggression – for example falling, or verbal difference. [Our group] has a member who stopped using his cane because he noticed, when he used it, he was called the n-word more. People saw him as an easy target.”

3. Experiences with new programs in response to COVID-19

The CERB doesn't help people on social assistance. People receiving ODSP, OW, and relying on informal or precarious income don't qualify for the CERB, or it is clawed back. Ease of application, and lack of clarity about who qualifies, create dilemmas for people living in poverty. Some expressed concern for those who do apply and may face consequences and loss of benefits later. People who have been living in Canada without permanent resident status for years and relying on cash-based jobs now can't qualify for the CERB because of lack of status.

“I didn't apply – but I know many who did. I don't blame them, they are desperate.”

The \$100 ODSP / OW top-up is inadequate, and people lack information about it. Many pointed out the injustice of the CERB being \$2,000, which implies that is the minimum amount people should be required to live on, while people on ODSP and OW live on far less and only received a \$100 top-up.

The requirement that recipients apply for the top-up is impeding people's access. Several organizations and individuals reported that many in their networks are unaware of the benefit. Recipients report being unable to apply because they can't reach workers who are on leave due to COVID-19. Organizations have had to divert attention from crisis response to informing members of this benefit and assisting them to apply.

Tenants continue to face rent increases and eviction threats in spite of the province's eviction moratorium. Tenants who have lost income fear eviction when the moratorium lifts.

“Our landlord wants a 3.9% increase. They're trying to get us on renovations that didn't need to be done. All cosmetic, none of it works. ... There's a couple on my top floor – he had a heart attack – they were bugging them every four months. They got rid of two people who paid rent late.”

Measures to support students are inadequate. Some students were excluded from access to the Student Benefit, and eligibility criteria posed barriers. Now, students are facing a summer with very few jobs available. Meanwhile, post-secondary institutions have continued to charge full tuition, while students have borne extra costs for technology to complete courses online. International students face extremely high fees.

“I thought about applying for the student benefit because I’m a student, but they want people to prove they are searching for work. How do we prove that?”

People are afraid to go into congregate shelters because of COVID-19 risk, and are frustrated by the unevenness and lack of clear information about the City’s hotel program for people experiencing homelessness. In Etobicoke and Scarborough, local residents and service providers report being unable to access hotel programs that open nearby, because they are being used to move people out of downtown encampments and shelters. People accessing cooling centres and those living in encampments are eager to know how to get on the list for a hotel spot, but unable to get information. Front-line workers also report the process for referrals is unclear.

“I have lots of friends who are still outside. Outreach workers will come by to talk for a minute, and give information about things supposedly set up for people outside. They will call and be told the whole hotel plan was scrapped. But we are also hearing from people in agencies that the plan isn’t scrapped. There’s lots of contradictory information. Everyone says this is one of hardest times they’ve ever been through, nobody knows what’s happening.”

Inner suburb homelessness experiences are different from downtown experiences, and require different strategies and solutions. Fewer residents are visibly street involved or living in encampments. Where encampments exist in Scarborough, most are one tent or a small number. Homelessness in the inner suburbs often manifests as multiple households and families sharing a single apartment, each paying high rent. Some residents are also couch surfing, or living in stairwells of apartment buildings. At the same time, some communities displaced from downtown encampments are now moving into Scarborough.

There are not enough services for people facing homelessness, poverty, and mental health challenges outside the downtown core. For those living outside, distance between City facilities further impedes access to washrooms, drinking water, and cooling centres. Residents in the inner suburbs may not have access to the services available to those facing homelessness downtown, because they may not be visibly street involved or do not want to be formally identified by the City. Mental health and addiction services are scarce in the surrounding GTA, and travelling downtown is a barrier.

D. Recommendations for recovery and rebuild planning

1. Priority actions for the City of Toronto's recovery and rebuild

The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected people facing homelessness, poverty, and inadequate housing, and people with disabilities, particularly those who are Indigenous, Black, people of colour, immigrants, refugees, women, and members of 2SLGBTQ+ communities. It is therefore critical that the City place the priorities of these groups at the centre of its recovery and rebuild plans.

Take leadership on cross-jurisdictional issues.

Policies and programs to address income, housing, disability, racism, policing, and other issues cross jurisdictional lines. Many of the areas identified below fall outside municipal jurisdiction, or rely on cooperation with other orders of government. The City should take leadership, do everything it is capable of within its own powers and resources, advocate for residents' needs, and call on other orders of government to respond to these priorities.

“We’re focusing on Toronto, but they need the other levels of government as well.”

Make major, rapid change the new normal.

Huge changes and investments that seemed impossible before now have suddenly become a reality. The City must not revert to piecemeal investments and glacial change in the recovery and rebuilding process. Instead, it should commit to building on the positive initiatives coming out of the crisis.

“When I heard the government had bought hotels, I thought, you couldn’t do this before but you can do it now? But if you don’t have this disease going around that could affect you, there’s all the time in the world!”

Proactively provide clear and complete information about benefits and programs.

Service providers and people seeking services require clear, accurate, complete, accessible, and up-to-date information about the CERB, the OW-ODSP top-up, and services for people facing homelessness. It can be done: a private citizen has created an online map with locations of resources such as washrooms, drinking water, showers, and cooling centres; and small non-profits have notified community

members of benefits they are entitled to. The City should be undertaking these functions to ensure all residents have timely and equitable access to information – especially those who need it most.

“Some of the services the City is listing aren’t even running.”

“We need a portal that has all of the basic information thrown together so that people don’t have to fight to get it – housing, food banks, showers, cooling centres.”

Urgently increase resources and services for people facing homelessness.

The shelter system is full, people wait hours or even days for a shelter bed, and an estimated 1,500 people are living outside without reliable access to water and washrooms. Community centres that have served as expansion sites for physical distancing are set to re-open to the public. The City must take urgent measures to ensure that people facing homelessness have immediate access to safe shelter, cooling centres, drinking water, sanitation, and other basic needs. There are not enough workers to meet the level of need; the City should engage paid peers to do outreach and support.

“We had a blind man at the cooling centre for five days, and I had to pull some strings in the background because he wasn’t getting any help anywhere else. It’s just been really, really stark out there.”

Implement protections for tenants.

The City must rapidly expand the rent bank, simplify the application process, and widen eligibility criteria, to subsidize tenants who can’t pay rent because of illness and lost income. Isolation and lost income brought on by the pandemic also increase vulnerable tenants’ risk of housing unit takeovers, in which others use threats, coercion, manipulation, and violence to force a tenant to allow them to live or conduct criminal activities in their unit. COVID-19 has taken a disproportionate toll in neighbourhoods where housing conditions are poor; tenants in those areas face a double jeopardy of illness and risk of eviction from lost income.

“In Etobicoke North, in Silverstone-Mount Olive-Jamestown, there were 470 COVID cases. We don’t know what the fallout will be in that small area. People are going to be losing their jobs, and they’re going to be in situations where they can’t pay their rent. So the City has to have a rent bank they can fall back on.”

Invest in permanent housing solutions.

The City must redirect investments from emergency shelters and temporary housing to permanent housing solutions. Consider expropriation and acquisition of hotels, motels, vacant units, and short-term rentals. Provide permanent housing to people leaving encampments, with respect for their autonomy and dignity, close to the services and informal supports they rely on. Distribute housing equitably across neighbourhoods, and make solutions available to those experiencing hidden homelessness.

“I want to look at worldwide solutions to homelessness. Look at Finland and other Scandinavian countries – they have little to no homelessness. Why is that? Why don’t we have that?”

“We have a lot of empty condos. Why not get people in there?”

“The city has to get into the business of building homes. It must lobby the province and feds for lands that they own within the city. In Etobicoke North, there’s a large tract of provincial land in the north east corner. They should give it to the city to build homes that are 30% of income. And the City should have its own construction company to do the work.”

Respond to gender-based violence.

Gender-based and family violence escalates in times of crisis. Public health directives to stay home have trapped women, youth, and children in situations of abuse.

“Funding is needed so people of sexual and gender minorities, and women, have the resources to escape.”

Increase income benefits to match the CERB.

Setting the CERB at \$2,000 per month and allowing recipients to earn \$1,000 more suggests that \$3,000 per month is the minimum people should be expected to live on. Governments must provide equitable income supports for people who rely on social assistance and disability benefits. Explore new ways to increase and stabilize income to provide financial security for everyone, including workers, students, parents, people with disabilities, and artists.

“Look at what able-bodied people are expected to live on with CERB and yet people with disabilities are expected to live on so much less!”

Make mental health services available in every neighbourhood.

The pandemic has had a profound impact on mental health and well-being for many residents, yet services and supports are difficult to access and tend to be concentrated downtown. The City should work with the province to establish mental health and addictions supports across Toronto and the GTA. These measures should be funded through the Ministry of Health and with funds diverted from police budgets.

“Put a building in every community with peer supporters, navigators, people trained to de-escalate, even some respite beds for when something happens.”

2. Meaningful engagement of advocates with lived expertise in recovery planning

In order to address the needs and priorities of those most affected, the City must engage the rights-based participation and leadership of advocates with lived expertise – and be accountable to these advocates and their communities in its recovery planning. Here are some actions the City, and other organizations, can take to make this engagement equitable and effective.

Engage the City's already-existing lived expert advisors.

The City already has lived expert advisory groups, such as the LEAG, as well as a roster of known experts who have participated in City policy processes such as the HousingTO External Advisory Committee. Yet these have not been convened to lend their insight and extensive knowledge to the City's COVID-19 crisis response or recovery plans. Not only is this a missed opportunity for the City, it is a failure of accountability to the members of these groups and their communities.

“The LEAG has gone silent. I've had Zoom meetings with every group that I'm involved with, but the City LEAG haven't asked us nothing. I haven't gotten an email or anything. It's like this false positive that I hear and see a lot. 'You're important! We know you can do it! You're smart, intelligent! You're an expert!' – Then it's silence.”

Include lived and living expert advisors at all crisis response and recovery planning tables.

Lack of input from advocates with lived expertise has blunted the benefit of crisis responses, and recovery plans will be similarly hampered without such input. The City must commit to meaningful participation of people with lived experience at all decision-making tables going forward.

Engage advocates with lived expertise from the outset, and make space for their leadership throughout the process.

The most effective engagement processes are led by, for, and with people with lived and living expertise of poverty, homelessness, and disability. The consultation model used for HousingTO, in which grassroots groups received funding to convene their members, is a good template to build on. When establishing advisory bodies, engage advocates with lived expertise from the outset, not as an add-in, so that their priorities are reflected throughout the process. Advocate groups require independence and autonomy to identify their own priorities and approaches, as well as resources and support to sustain their activities.

“The voices need to be involved from the get-go. You don’t get to bring your agenda or your proposition or your process already packaged. We should be involved from the get-go in making the process and setting it up. That’s inclusion.”

Compensate people equitably for their expertise.

Whether they are engaged in service provision or consultation, people with lived experience are rarely equitably compensated for their work. When peers on ODSP work in front-line services, for example, they bring exceptional empathy and expertise to providing referrals and services – yet half their wages are clawed back. Advocates with lived expertise are often expected to provide consultation for free, or in exchange for a token honorarium, while City staff and professional consultants are paid to sit at the same tables. Even advocacy organizations may fail to compensate advocates with lived expertise appropriately.

“When I was project coordinator of [organization], before I came on, they were willing to pay people dirt money to be on the advisory. It took me coming in, with my experiences, to push them to pay better.”

“There are advocates who have passed away during COVID whose funerals are being go-funded. And that shows you how much of their life and their value and their time are being given and they don’t have adequate money to help themselves or leave behind for their families. Their funeral expenses have to be funded by their supporters.”

Address imbalances of power and influence.

Professionalized and bureaucratic environments have been used to silence and disempower people living with poverty, homelessness, and disability. Even with efforts at inclusion, these power dynamics are still at play in policy settings, and must be confronted and dismantled to enable authentic participation.

“We have to realize that there are power dynamics at play. And when power, privilege, and oppression are playing a role, I’m a very vocal person and I take a lot of risks, but not everyone is comfortable with taking risks. These power dynamics could force some people to just go along with what they think the municipal government wants.”

Provide training for those with and without lived expertise.

One important way to promote shared power is to provide training to all members of advisory bodies – both those with and without lived expertise. People facing poverty and homelessness may require education about policy processes, and how to navigate policy spaces strategically. Those without lived experience may need training on inclusion and authentic communication.

“There is possible intimidation for people with lived experience at the table with professionals. We need trainings for people to be more engaged at these tables. I hear a lot about the fear aspect – people have a lot to say but when they get there they are afraid to participate. These tables work within a particular format, but people aren’t informed about this and so then they go quiet.”

Make engagement accessible by addressing barriers and covering the cost of technology.

Engagement processes must incorporate all forms of access and accommodation to enable the participation of members with disabilities. Use of information and communications technology now spans income divides: the City and organizations should not assume that advocates with lived expertise do not have the skills to participate in virtual meetings. While many are skilled users of technology, the cost of hardware and services continues to pose barriers. Like electricity and running water, information technology is a necessary infrastructure, and the City should provide universal access. The City should equip advocates with lived expertise for equitable participation.

“I called Rogers about a cheaper plan, but it’s only for tenants in TCHC. How can people participate if they don’t have the tools to engage?”

Build institutional memory and cultural change for progress within the City.

Long-standing advocates work hard to shift knowledge and practice in the City, only to see those gains erased when staff move on to other areas. The City needs mechanisms for integrating rights-based participation and leadership into the institutional culture.

“We had a good run. We had all the grassroots groups, a bunch of us got trained through speaker’s bureaus, tenant change bureaus, and we came up through the years, and we peaked. And now it’s like, it’s all new staff at the City. Younger ones, new ones, ones who never worked with us. And all of a sudden it’s, ‘Can we do this again? Can you tell us again please?’ I really don’t like that part. It’s depressing.”

Broaden networks to get more people involved.

There is a tendency to invite familiar advocates to sit on advisory bodies. Instead, the City and organizations should diversify participation, and structure recruitment so that advisors represent not only themselves, but their networks. This will improve both the relevance and the accountability of advisory bodies.

“People with networks are invited to tables, and they miss a lot of people who aren’t known. They should restructure the way people are engaged, so it’s not just about the person on the advisory that they’re engaging but also [the person’s] broader networks.”

Act on input from advocates with lived expertise.

Last but far from least, the City must demonstrate accountability to advocates and their communities by taking action on the priorities and approaches they recommend. Failure to do so risks discouraging participation and alienating communities. Without a good-faith commitment to action, rights-based participation by people directly affected is reduced to a token gesture.

“We’ve been screaming the same thing year after year. They write it down but we don’t hear about it again. They say they can’t afford what we need, but they’ve got the money for police budget increases. They need to act on what we’re telling them to do.”

E. Building leadership of advocates with lived expertise

The experts who came together for this discussion not only shared recommendations for the City – they also shared strategies for self-advocacy. Here are some messages for advocates with lived expertise.

Seize the momentum to push for major changes on housing, homelessness, poverty, racism, police violence, and exclusion of people with disabilities.

“COVID has provided a unique time where we at once have the eyes, the ears, the hearts, the minds, of the world. And this is the time to push through on every proposal that every advocate has been fighting for years. We need not to lose the value of this window, because we don’t always have all the senses engaged. This is the time that all of us, in all our sectors, have to push. This is not the time when we have to hesitate, but this is the time to go full force, because this window will not remain. We have to push to raise equity now, as much as we can.”

Don’t wait to be consulted – lead the way.

“We have been leading the engagement. If it wasn’t for us, it wouldn’t have happened, or wouldn’t have been done the way we are doing it. It’s not like we are invited to things – we are the ones making changes. If we were at the table, you would have heard about [these issues] before this.”

Just say no to inadequate compensation and inequitable processes.

“Sometimes we have to stand firm and say no to work that isn’t equitable and doesn’t pay a fair wage.”

Proactively provide guidelines to governments and organizations who seek to engage advocates with lived expertise.

“It’s about providing them with guidelines from us on how to [meaningfully engage]. My organization did that with the provincial government but I’ve never heard of it being done on the municipal level. Maybe this table can be part of that change, in terms of providing them with a document, to say, ‘Here’s what you should be doing, start implementing it.’ But it takes all of us to tell them what to do. Not ask them, tell them.”

Learn to navigate policy spaces, and know who your allies are.

“When you don’t have allies and an understanding of how to navigate, you get manipulated. You need to know who is actually on your side and what viewpoints they are coming with. Because you don’t know who’s who, and everyone is smiling and talking in a sweet tone, lots of heads nodding. And sometimes you are being put in a situation that without realizing it you are being manipulated. You can feel it, but you don’t know how to combat it. That’s when first voices are being used and misappropriated. And then nothing of what you said has been implemented, and you realize you were wasting your time.”

Organize together for change.

“This reinforces why it’s important for us to come together and not rely on the City to do the right thing. They’ve proven through their track record that they don’t use what they’ve already got. So we have to rely on each other and not imitate them. We need to work together and collaborate and support one another’s initiatives and be there for one another.”